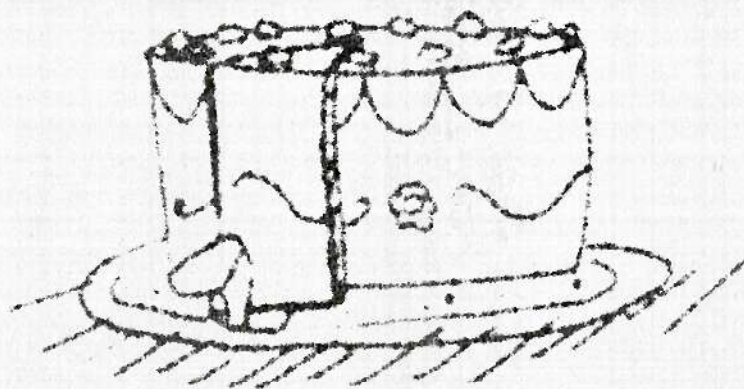




FURROW'S FIXERS
AND THE
CASE OF THE
MISSING CAKE

The morning sun was already fierce by the time Constance and Christian Marsh arrived at the Wentworth Town Hall. At nine years old, the twins were still young enough to find any outing an adventure, especially when it involved their mother's famous sponge cake.

"Mind you don't drop it," Mrs. Eleanor Marsh called from the motor car as Christian carefully lifted the cake tin from the back seat.

"I won't, Mother," Christian said, though his arms wobbled slightly under the weight.

"And remember your manners," Mother added. "Mrs. Patterson from the post office will be judging, so be polite even if she talks your ears off."

The twins traded knowing glances. Mrs. Patterson could talk underwater, as Father liked to say. With this last exchange their mother, driven by the loyal farmhand Hammett, returned to Ploughman's Furrow. She would return later to be present for the judging but needed to first attend to some matters at the Marsh's quaint,

pastoral estate.

The Wentworth Country Women's Association Annual Bake Sale was a serious affair. Tables lined the town hall, each displaying an impressive array of biscuits, slices, and cakes. The air smelled wonderfully of butter, sugar and, of course, competition.

"Where should we put it?" Connie asked, surveying the chaos.

A harried woman with flour still dusting her apron pointed toward a table near the far wall. "Sponges over there, love. Mind Mrs. Abernathy's lemon cake, she's convinced it'll win this year."

Christian carefully navigated between the tables while Connie cleared a space. Mrs. Jean Abernathy stood nearby, adjusting her own cake's position for the third time. She was a tall, angular woman who always looked as though she'd just bitten into something sour.

"Oh," Mrs. Abernathy said, her voice dripping with false sweetness. "The Marsh children. How... lovely to see you."

"Good morning, Mrs. Abernathy," Connie said brightly giving a low-effort attempt at a curtsy. "Your cake looks wonderful."

Mrs. Abernathy's expression suggested she knew flattery when she heard it. "Yes, well, I've been perfecting my recipe for years. Not that I'm competitive, you understand?"

Christian carefully set their mother's cake on the table. It was a magnificent creation: three layers of golden sponge filled with raspberry jam and cream, dusted with icing sugar.

"I see your mother's entered again," Mrs. Abernathy continued, eyeing the Marsh cake with poorly disguised interest. "Though I do hope the cream doesn't turn in this heat."

Before either twin could respond, Mrs. Abernathy swept away to fuss over her own entry.

"She's worried," Christian observed quietly.

"About the cream turning?" Connie asked.

"No. About Mother's cake winning. Again."

Their mother had won first prize at the last two bake sales, a fact that Mrs. Abernathy had not taken graciously. Last year, she'd suggested darkly that Eleanor Marsh must be using "Sydney ingredients," as though this constituted unfair advantage.

The twins spent the next hour helping to arrange tables and greeting neighbors. The hall filled with women carrying covered dishes, children darting between tables, and the steady hum of country conversation. Christian spotted Mr. Gardenia from the library examining a tidy book stall some industrious resident had set up, while Connie noticed Miss Fletcher, admiring a particularly impressive pavlova.

At half past ten, Mrs. Patterson called for attention. The judging would begin.

"All entrants must leave the hall," she announced, consulting a sheaf of papers. "The judges will deliberate in private. We'll ring the bell when you may return."

The crowd filed out into the bright sunshine. Mother had arranged to collect the

twins at noon, which left them with over an hour to amuse themselves.

"Fancy a lemonade?" Christian suggested, pointing toward the general store across the square.

They were halfway across the street when they heard the commotion.

Mrs. Patterson emerged from the hall, her face flushed. "Has anyone seen Mrs. Thompson? Mrs. Thompson!"

An elderly woman separated from the crowd. "Yes, dear? Is something wrong?"

"There's been... well, I hardly know how to say it. One of the cakes is missing."

A collective gasp rose from the assembled women.

"Missing?" someone echoed. "Which cake?"

Mrs. Patterson consulted her papers, her hands shaking. "Mrs. Eleanor Marsh's raspberry sponge."

Connie and Christian exchanged horrified glances.

The next few minutes were chaos.

Women insisted on returning to the hall to verify their own entries' safety. Mrs. Patterson tried to maintain order while simultaneously suggesting various explanations. Perhaps someone had moved it? Perhaps it had been taken outside by mistake? Perhaps Mrs. Marsh had come to collect it early?

"Mother wouldn't do that," Christian said firmly when this last theory reached the twins. "She's home making lunch. She doesn't even know there's a problem."

Mrs. Abernathy appeared at his elbow. "How tragic," she said, in a tone that suggested she found it anything but. "Though I suppose these things happen. Perhaps the cream did turn and someone disposed of it as a kindness?"

"The cream was perfectly fresh this morning," Connie replied, her temper rising.

"Of course, dear. I'm sure it was," Mrs. Abernathy drifted away, looking rather pleased with herself.

"Christian," Connie said quietly, "I

think..."

"I think so too," her brother interrupted. "But we need proof."

The twins had been reading detective stories, proper ones from England, about brilliant men who solved impossible crimes through observation and deduction. They'd discussed starting their own detective agency, though their parents thought it a phase that would pass.

Perhaps this was their chance to prove otherwise.

"Right," Christian said, adopting what he hoped was the manner of a Scotland Yard investigator. "Let's examine the scene."

They slipped back into the hall while the adults argued outside. The sponge table sat undisturbed, a conspicuous gap where their mother's cake had been.

"No crumbs," Connie observed, crouching to examine the floor. "So it wasn't dropped or eaten here."

"And the other cakes are all still here," Christian added. "So it wasn't a general theft."

"Just Mother's cake," Connie said slowly.
"The one that might have won."

They looked at each other, the same thought occurring to both simultaneously.

"We need to search all over this hall," Christian decided.

They split up, checking behind curtains, under tables, inside cupboards. Nothing. Christian was beginning to think they'd imagined the whole conspiracy when Connie hissed from near the back door.

"Christian! Here!"

He hurried over. Connie pointed to a rubbish bin beside the exit. Sitting on top, still in its tin, was their mother's raspberry sponge, or what remained of it. Someone had deliberately smashed it, crushing the layers together until it was an unrecognisable mess of cake, cream, and jam.

"Oh," Christian breathed. "Oh, that's rotten."

"That's sabotage," Connie corrected grimly.

"But who would..." Christian stopped.
"Actually, we know who. We just need to prove it."

"How?"

Christian thought hard. Their detective stories always emphasised evidence. "Check the tin," he said. "Carefully."

Connie lifted the tin gently. On one side, near the handle, was a smudge of yellow. She sniffed it cautiously. "Lemon," she announced. "Lemon icing."

"Mrs. Abernathy's lemon cake," Christian said triumphantly. "She must have had it on her hands when she moved our cake."

"But that's not quite enough," Connie cautioned. "She could have gotten lemon on the tin accidentally, just from standing near it."

Christian frowned, stumped. Then his face brightened. "The bin! Look at the bin!"

Connie looked. Sitting beneath the ruined cake was a handkerchief. A delicate white handkerchief embroidered with the initials J.A.

"Jean Abernathy," they said together.

"She must have used it to carry the cake," Christian reasoned. "To keep her hands clean. Then she forgot it when she threw everything in the bin."

"But why would she throw away the evidence?" Connie wondered. "Why not take it home?"

"Because she couldn't risk being seen leaving with a cake tin that didn't belong to her," Christian explained, warming to his theory. "And she probably planned to remove it after everyone left. She just didn't expect us to find it so quickly."

Armed with their evidence, the twins fetched Mrs. Patterson and explained what they'd discovered. The postmistress listened with growing horror, then marched outside and demanded Mrs. Abernathy join her for a private word.

What exactly was said, the twins never learned. But when Mrs. Abernathy emerged five minutes later, her face was scarlet and she departed without collecting her own cake. Mrs.

Patterson quietly announced that due to "unforeseen circumstances," Mrs. Marsh's entry would be disqualified "though through no fault of Mrs. Marsh's, I assure everyone" and another cake would win first prize.

When Mother collected the twins at noon, they explained everything during the drive home. Hammett keeping the speed low as to not interrupt their conversation.

"So Mrs. Abernathy sabotaged my cake?" Mother said, sounding more amused than angry. "How very petty of her."

"We saved your tin, though," Connie offered.

"And we solved our first proper mystery," Christian added hopefully.

Mother glanced at them in the rearview mirror, her expression thoughtful. "I suppose you did, didn't you? My clever little detectives."

"Do you think we could do it again?" Connie asked. "Solve mysteries, I mean?"

"If you apply the same careful thinking to your schoolwork," Mother said diplomatically.

"I don't see why not."

The twins grinned at each other. They'd need a proper name, of course. Something that sounded official and impressive. Something that would make people take them seriously.

But that could wait. For now, they'd solved the Case of the Missing Cake, and that was adventure enough for one morning.

As they turned down the long drive toward Ploughman's Furrow, Christian said thoughtfully, "Do you suppose there are other mysteries in Wentworth?"

"Bound to be," Connie replied confidently. "And when there are, we'll be ready."

"Oh my two little detectives!" Mother said, hugging them tightly in the back of the car. "You're Ploughman's Furrow's very own fixers that's what you are, Furrow's Fixers."

Behind them, the town of Wentworth dozed in the midday heat, keeping its secrets for now. But the Marsh twins, now known as Furrow's Fixers, would be watching.